

**Love in a Time of Hate**  
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Good morning. The invitation to speak to you today is a great gift, because it has given me a structured setting in which to reflect on a difficult matter of some urgency, one that I have been shoving under every available rug since Election Day 2016. Once I accepted T.W.'s kind invitation, I knew I was out of rugs. So this opportunity is something like the "opportunity" I give my 7-month-old puppy to stay in her crate until she learns how not to eat the furniture. We are both the better for our forced reflection time.

Here is the urgent problem: Hate. The hateful speech of white supremacists, yes. Hateful policies that separate immigrant families and criminalize poverty, yes and yes. But if I were to preach to you today about those evils and how we must counter them with messages of love for the vulnerable, the outcast, the stranger, we would all leave mostly untroubled. Buoyed, perhaps, with a renewed commitment to the exhausting work of social justice, but not, I suspect, troubled in any fundamental way. Please allow me to trouble you, to connect my trouble to yours.

We live in a time of hate. This could perhaps be said of any age but there are indicators that collective animosity has intensified and increasingly permeated American life in ways that we have not seen before. The incidence of hate crimes rose again in 2017 after decreasing for more than a decade from 2001 to 2014, 58% race-based, according to the FBI, 21% targeting the victims' religion. Less talked about is the rise of political hate. While rarely violent, left-right antagonism now appears well-aligned with Webster's definition of hate as "intense hostility and aversion usually deriving from fear, anger, or sense of injury."

Survey data show that Americans are now more politically polarized than at any time recent decades, involving not just deep policy disagreements but visceral animosity toward the other political team. PEW researchers report that among both Democrats and Republicans, the share with a highly negative view of the opposing party has more than doubled since 1994. Most of these intense partisans now believe that those of the opposing party actually threaten the nation's well-being. And this hostility extends to our personal lives as well. The dating site Match.com reports that 60 percent of singles are less open to dating across party lines than two years ago, in what Match calls a "love deficit." Reds and blues interact less, in our neighborhoods, social groups, and online, and so it gets harder to see each other as real people rather than the caricatures we paint, and caricatures are easy to hate.

So we have a social problem, and experts offer many explanations of its sources and character. Political scientists explain how gerrymandering and media fragmentation have squeezed moderates out of the electoral process. Cognitive scientists are exploring the differing size and development of two different brain regions among liberals and conservatives. Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains polarization with reference to six moral frameworks we all share but that liberals and conservatives prioritize differently—liberals work within frameworks of care and equality while conservatives emphasize freedom, loyalty, authority, and purity. Today, when we amplify our own messages and mute those of others by customizing our newsfeeds and social groups, these virtues are set in opposition. Immigration, for instance, becomes only about *care for the vulnerable* on the left, and only about the *violation of authority* on the right. And so we shout past each other.

Some of the animosity resulting from left-right polarization can likely be engineered away with political strategies. A recent Harvard Business School white paper calls, for instance, for redistricting, nonpartisan top-four primaries, more open debate access, and real campaign finance reform. If public political discourse and policy-making included more moderates, this argument goes, space would open up for dialogue and compromise. Amen.

But today let's consider that this polarization might also be a *spiritual* problem. That what ails is not only our political system but our souls, wearied and beaten by relentless, routinized hate. I have read that alcohol consumption is up since November 2016 and that "Headline Stress Disorder" is a real thing. We are soaked in anger, fear, and frustration. And numbing out on a third glass of wine to get through Anderson Cooper is probably not a solid approach. (I'll keep you posted.)

What would it mean to practice love in these times? Are we asked, by our faith traditions, our moral codes, our spiritual superheroes, to love the white supremacist? The serial sexual predator? The school shooter? And what about the neighbor or co-worker, whose votes, bumper stickers, Facebook posts, or offhand jokes we perceive as somehow enabling these horrors?

In a revised version of the Martin Luther King sermon I read from a moment ago, written when King was in jail five years later, he says we should be happy that Jesus did not tell us to like our enemies. "It is almost impossible to like some people. 'Like' is a sentimental and affectionate word. How can we be affectionate toward a person whose avowed aim is to crush our very being and place innumerable stumbling blocks in our path? How can we like a person who is threatening our children and bombing our homes? That is impossible." The love that Kings calls for is not affection, not even tolerance or looking the other way, but the radical love that sees, engages, and honors the other we have most despised.

It starts, I think, with seeing. To love is to see as we would be seen, in our wholeness and our brokenness. To see the most deplorable among us as more than their most deplorable word or act, to see through rage and ignorance and hate to the fear and injury that almost always lie beneath.

There is an incredible scene near the end of the 1995 film *Dead Man Walking*, in which Sister Helen Prejean, played by Susan Sarandon, accompanies convicted

rapist and murderer Matthew Poncelet, played by Sean Penn, to his execution. The film traces the development of their relationship over months, as Sister Helen slowly breaks through Matthew's bravado and denial and leads him to a reckoning with his guilt. She has persisted as his spiritual advisor in the face of both his insolence and the anger and anguish of the victims' families. Even as she uncovers the vulnerable and ultimately remorseful man within the criminal, the suffering of the victims and their families is never out of the frame. In their final moments before he is led away, Sister Helen says, "I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I'll be the face of love for you." Their eye contact in the execution scene, as she sits in the glass-walled observation room next to his victims' parents, is intense and filled with grace, precisely because she has neither dismissed his humanity nor absolved his guilt.

This is a hard kind of seeing, and few of us will be called to be the face of love for violent criminals. But I figure if Sister Helen can see the wholeness of Mathew Poncelet, maybe I can learn to see beyond the caricature of Rush Limbaugh, or at least of my neighbor who is his faithful listener.

Unlike Sister Helen, most of us are not very good at holding in tension the many things that we all are. And it is harder than ever now to see beyond highly charged binaries: Black lives matter or blue lives matter, racist or Antifa, pro-choice or pro-life, free speech or safe space. If we could see beyond these antipodes, we would likely find that we are more both/and than either/or, more spectrum than pole.

We know from loving our partners and children that to love is to be vulnerable, to expose ourselves to the risk of loss, the certainty of our own imperfection, and the agony of the loved one's suffering. To practice love in this time of hate is to open ourselves to the vulnerability and pain of those we have marked as the enemy, to look softly on them as fellow humans in this strange time—maybe afraid, probably a little confused, surely a bit weary of the fight. When we see the

other this way, our own posture can shift, releasing defenses and allowing curiosity, doubt, and nuance to emerge.

But here's an important point: This loving of enemies is not a generic thing. It can only be done in particular ways by particular individuals, each in our own setting. I am abashed when I imagine the setting in which Reverend King was preaching to his congregation in 1957 Montgomery. He was enjoining love of enemies in the midst of lynchings, church bombings, and the daily injustices of violently enforced segregation. I recall in this context an insight shared with me by the Peruvian Catholic priest and liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez that loving one's enemies doesn't mean not *having* enemies. That is, there are real adversaries in the work of social justice, and to understand love of enemies as remaining politely silent, or benignly passive, or even superficially empathetic, in the face of injustice is to misunderstand profoundly, even sinfully. And the burden to act should fall harder on some of us than others.

I learned this lesson painfully in teaching a class at Chico state last year on religion and American government, focused on the problem of polarization. We were working with the concept of "othering," the process of categorizing groups of people as fundamentally different from oneself and therefore easily dismissed as somehow less worthy of respect and dignity. As a depolarizing strategy, I asked them to identify their other—mine was an NRA member—and then write an empathetic narrative from that person's perspective. Their essays broke my heart. Because what I have not told you is that this class was made up entirely of first generation college students, all low income, mostly Hispanic and African-American, several undocumented. Their "others" were rich people, racists, anti-immigrant bullies. As I read their essays, I realized that I, a privileged white woman, had asked these students to empathize with their oppressors. And they had, because I had told them to. Brutal lesson learned: this is not their work.

Each of us must do the hard work of love that our circumstances demand. For some, the urgent imperative is self-love, to see in themselves what a system stacked against them has denied—full and complex humanity, dignity, and

possibility. For others, it is to use the safety of our privilege to undo privilege, by holding our adversaries accountable while engaging *their* humanity and the permanent possibility of reconciliation. Powerful men must do the work of love that remakes a culture of sexual abuse, powerful whites the work of love that dismantles white supremacy, and those of us with solid 401ks the work of love that ends the scandal of more than one in five children living in poverty in the richest country in the world. To find a way to do this work across deep lines of difference, open and vulnerable, is the challenge of our time.

Here is what I try to tell myself, having now poked around a little under those lumpy rugs. To return hate with hate is not only unproductive, it's exhausting and depressing. Instead I'm chasing joy, through the work of love.

I will keep holding signs on the corner of 20<sup>th</sup> Street and Martin Luther King in a monthly show of solidarity with the most vulnerable. I will continue to hold my elected representatives accountable with my votes, and with friendly texts, emails, signs outside their offices, questions at their meetings, more emails, phone calls, signatures on petitions, and a few more emails. And from here on, I will also practice curiosity in conversation with my gun-loving colleague, spectrum thinking with my pro-life relatives, and patience with myself as I blunder and stumble on.

But here's what I won't do: like Facebook posts or join in conversations that attack people personally or serve only to amplify the echo chamber and reassure my team of its moral purity. I hold on to Thich Nhat Hanh's injunction to "Speak the truth, but not to punish."

David Brooks recently wrote about the "scarcity mindset" that seems to have encroached in our national consciousness—any for you means less for me in a game of zero-sum resources. He contrasts this with an earlier "abundance mindset" that assumed there was more than enough to go around and so we could afford to be generous. Brooks is writing about economics and politics—the abundance or scarcity of wealth, jobs, and rights. But we can also think of this in

a spiritual context. It is a truth affirmed by our many and varied religious traditions that the universe is ultimately beneficent, inexhaustible in its graciousness and infinite in its capacity to refresh, forgive, and renew. Let's live in that universe, and seek out new friendships there.